www.historymarg.com

Original Article
ISSN (Online): 2582-7472

ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts
July-December 2022 3(2), 876–880

MAHATMA GANDHI'S NOTIONS OF NON-VIOLENCE

Bindu Mathew [1]

[1] Assistant Professor of History, NMSM Govt. College, Kalpetta

DOI
10.29121/shodhkosh.v3.i2.2022.3344

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Copyright: © 2022 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.

OPEN ACCESS

ABSTRACT

the philosophy of non-violence or Ahimsa stands as the corner stone of Mahatma Gandhi's life and work, shaping his social political and spiritual ideologies. This paper tries to discuss the multi-faceted dimensions of Gandhian nonviolence, examining its roots and its practical applications in the freedom movement. It explores how Gandhian political ideologies offered a powerful frame work for resisting oppression without resorting to violence. By analyzing Gandhi's writings and speeches this paper studies the enduring significance of non-violence as a tool for justice and human dignity.

Keywords: Non-Violence, Violence, Ahimsa, Satyagraha, Constructive Programme

1. INTRODUCTION

The paper seeks to reflect Mahatma Gandhi's notions of non-violence which emerge from his holistic various public activities and utterances. It is definitely more than killing- non-killing kind of understanding of nonviolence. Gandhi used the term in multifarious ways to make it a chief tool or vehicle for holistic mass based democratic politics of social transformation.

It is pertinent here to refer some instances which substantiate Gandhian non-violence as a multidimensional, multilayered and nuanced phenomenon.

For example, in 1918 what he said about Swaminarayana and Vallabh cult is quite revealing in this regard. Criticizing them Gandhi said,

'It was all to the good, of course, that people gave up drinking, smoking, etc.; this, however, is not an end in itself, it is only a means. If a smoker happens to be a man of character, his company is worth cultivating. If, on the contrary, a man who has never smoked in his life is an adulterer, he can be of little service. The love taught by Swaminarayana an Vallabh is all sentimentalism. It cannot make one a man of true love. Swaminarayana and Vallabh simply did not reflect over the true nature of non-violence.'

In 1921, he interpreted non-violence with civility, good manners and humility in these words, 'Civility, good manners and humility – these virtues are at such a discount these days that they seem to have no place at all in the building of our character.' further he said, 'Similarly, if a person is truthful in speech, we give him a license to be sharp-

www.historymarg.com

tongued and a khadi-wearer can come down in fury upon those who do not wear khadi. In like manner, a person who offers civil disobedience sometimes acts as if he had a license to be insolent to others…. It may be safely asserted that a person deficient in good manners lacks discrimination and that, lacking discrimination, he lacks everything else…. Civility and humility are expressions of the spirit of non-violence while incivility and insolence indicate the spirit of violence. A non-co-operator, therefore, ought never to be uncivil. This lack of manners delays our victory in the struggle we are carrying on, for, as politeness disarms anger and hatred, incivility increases hostility. I trust no one will understand politeness to mean flattery. To be polite means to show respect towards others while clinging to our own dharma. Because I put a vermilion mark on my forehead, I may not sneer at another who does not do so. If I face the east when praying, I should not feel contempt for my Muslim brother who says his namaz with his face towards the west. Ability to pronounce Sanskrit words correctly does not entitle me to speak contemptuously of the sounds in the Arabic language. A lover of khadi, while wearing a khadi cap himself, can still be tolerant of a person who wears a sola hat and loves him. Where there is egotism, we shall find incivility and arrogance.'

In 1924, on the issue of coercion for constructive change he replied that,

'If, however, it becomes necessary to cause suffering to anyone in order to make someone else happy, to do so dispassionately and unselfishly can be non-violence.'

In 1926, about 'calling a hypocrite a hypocrite', he wrote in a letter,

'Calling a hypocrite is no violence but perhaps there is violence in not calling his so. What would we call a serpent? If my son is worthless and if I describe his using good epithets, I would be guilty of untruth, and in my humble opinion untruth in any form is violence. In calling a worthless person there is no violence, but unedifying behavior on our part towards him is violence.'

In 1928, he went beyond killing- non-killing paradigm for understanding non-violence. He sanctioned the killing of a calf which created a lot of uproar. He wrote,

'It is necessary to bear three points in mind in order to understand the non-violence of the act in question: (1) It is ignorance to believe that every act of killing is violence. (2) As there is violence in killing, so also there is violence in inflicting what we regard as lesser suffering. (3) Violence and non-violence are mental attitudes; they concern the feelings in our heart.'

In the same context, he criticized those who understood ahimsa only as a blind fetish. He wrote,

'But the trouble with our votaries of ahimsa is that they have made of ahimsa a blind fetish and put the greatest obstacle in the way of the spread of true ahimsa in our midst. The current (and in my opinion, mistaken) view of ahimsa has drugged our conscience are rendered us insensible to a host of other and more insidious forms of himsa like harsh words, harsh judgments, ill-will, anger and spite and lust of cruelty.'

Gandhi adopted and propagated nonviolence also because of its efficacy in a concrete historical Indian situation. He wrote in 1925,

'I hold too that whatever may be true of other countries, a bloody revolution will not succeed in India. The masses will not respond. A movement in which masses have no active part can do no good to them. A successful bloody revolution can only mean further misery for the masses. For it would be still foreign rule for them.'

Again in 1927, he wrote about efficacy of non-violence in non-cooperation movement days in these words,

'The mass awakening that took place in 1920 all of a sudden was perhaps the greatest demonstration of the efficacy of non-violence. The Government has lost prestige never to be regained. Titles, law-courts, educational institutions no longer inspire the awe they did in 1920.'

Similarly, in AICC meeting when he was questioned for efficacy of non-violence in politics, he retorted like astute political mind in these words,

'Now it is ten years and you have not been convinced about its potency. What can I say in its defense? Review the course of the last ten years. Look at the national awakening, at national assertion, at the freedom of opinion, association and action shown by the people. Are these not the fruits of the working of the non-violent creed? '

Again in 1924, on Hindu-Muslim question, Gandhi highlighted the role of non-violence in regulating the relations between different races in these words,

www.historymarg.com

'I am asking my countrymen to adopt non-violence as their final creed, for the purpose of regulating the relations between the different races, and for the purpose of attaining swaraj…. For in my opinion, an attitude of non-violence in our mutual relations is an indispensable condition prior to a discussion of the remedies for the removal of the tension. It must be common cause between the two communities that neither party shall take the law into its own hands, but that all points in dispute, wherever and whenever they arise, shall be decided by reference either to private arbitration or to the law courts, if they wish. This is the whole meaning of non-violence, so far as the communal matters are concerned.'

Moreover, as a super strategist, Gandhi knew more than anybody else that a movement also needs protection from the tyranny of its opponent. It is not a wise move to invite repression from an opponent. Violent movements are crushed more brutal than non-violent movements. So, it was essentially a strategic decision also to keep the movement non-violent. In 1925, he described this in these words,

'I do not regard the revolutionary of India to be less sacrificing, less noble or less lovers of their country than the rest. But I respectfully contend that their sacrifice, nobility and love are not only a waste of effort, but being ignorant and misguided, do and have done more harm to the country than any activity. For, the revolutionaries have retarded the progress of the country. Their reckless disregard of the lives of their opponents has brought on repression that has made those that do not take part in their warfare more cowardly than they were before. Repression does good only to those who are prepared for it. The masses are not prepared for the repression that follows in the trail of revolutionary activities and unwittingly strengthen the hands of the very Government which the revolutionaries are seeking to destroy.'

Again in 1930, he highlighted the historic need of making non-violence a pre-requisite for all activities in these words,

'From violence done to the foreign ruler, violence to our own people whom we may consider to be obstructing the country's progress is an easy natural step. Whatever may have been the result of violent activities in other countries and without reference to the philosophy of non-violence, it does not require-much intellectual effort to see that if we resort to violence for ridding society of the many abuses which impede our progress, we shall but add to our difficulties and postpone the day of freedom. The people unprepared for reform because unconvinced of their necessity will be maddened with rage over their coercion, and will seek the assistance of the foreigner in order to retaliate.'

Being the tallest leader of national movement, Gandhi had a challenging task of negotiating all these complex and diversified tendencies in such a way that these would not become antagonistic to each other. He focused so much on multi-dimensional, multifarious interpretations of non-violence in his typical dialectic that emerged a nuanced version of non-violence. Some of these characteristics of Gandhian non-violence are to be noted.

Gandhi in 1939, speaking to his close associates in Gandhi Seva Sangh gave a glimpse of his non-violent method of engaging with opponent in these words,

'We do not become non-violent simply because we do not hit anyone. We indulge in violence through our thought and reasoning. This is not a sign of a sharp intellect. Keeping ourselves alert is an indication of sharp intelligence. When we are faced by a Jayaprakash there is saying. There is an ocean of difference between him and me. But non-violence means that we must have the patience to listen to the opponent. This is the characteristic of non-violence. This is what is meant by rushing into the mouth of the enemy. A non-violent person tells his opponent not to trouble himself too much for he is going to him on his own. It does not mean that we should become soft. We must keep our intelligence sharp. If we can, we should reply to the arguments of our opponents. We should try to understand his arguments from his point of view, and accept whatever may be acceptable. If I try to understand the point of view of my opponent, it does not mean that I have accepted everything he has said, or that I have flattered him. If we train our mind thus, we can continue to propagate truth and non-violence all through our life.'

It is interesting to note about comprehending his mind on nonviolence that in 1927, he openly reflected over his decision to withdraw in these words,

'The fact is that the people were not prepared for non-violence and the campaign would have ended in a widespread terrorism. The Government knows that Non-co-operation is not dead. They dread nothing so much as non-co-operation. They know how to deal with a violent outbreak but they don't know how to deal with non-violence and non-co-operation. The Bardoli decision was an orderly and deliberate withdrawal, not a panicky rout. The weakening of Government prestige that had taken place at the time of the so-called ultimatum, still continues. It is open to us to undertake a forward movement at any time we choose. The awe of the Government is gone forever.'

www.historymarg.com

It is relevant to suggest that Gandhi did not propagate non-violence in isolation. He invariably associated it with other aspects of Gandhi's holistic politics like Satyagraha, Constructive Programme and others. He did not put non-violence in any separate category and always emphasized its coherent interdependent and inclusiveness with other segments of public life and society. As he put it 'in the garden of non-violence there are many plants.

The strategic perspective of non-violence and also its practicability needs to be highlighted because, if Gandhian non-violence would be just a moralistic rhetoric or a goody-goody type of thing, he would have been not in a position to the most important political leader of Indian National Movement and even after his surname Gandhi remains an emblem of politics. It is not that Gandhi did not give a glimpse of his strategic mind. For example, in 1939, he said in a discussion that,

'An able general always gives battle in his own time on the grounds of his own choice he always retains the initiative in these respects and never allows it to pass into the hands of the enemy.'

In the same year, in a discussion with Maurice Frydman, Gandhi talked like a strategic leader,

'Compromise comes in at every step, but one must realize that it is a compromise and keep the final goal constantly in front of the mind's eye.'

Gandhian non-violence obviously does not permit to kill the opponent. It is interesting to note that whenever Gandhi condemned the killings of British officials by violence, he did not base his condemnation on moralistic humanitarian domain. He emphatically argued the inadequacy of the killings based violent romanticism for over throwing British rule. For example, in 1921, reacting to Molegaon violence, he remarked, 'those who commit violence of the Molegaon type are the real cooperators with the government. The latter will gladly lose a few officers if thereby they could kill non-co-operation. If you more such murders and we shall forfeit the sympathy of the masses.' Even in 1909, he condemned Dhingra's act as misguided yet he recognized him as a patriot. He observed, 'Those who believe that India has gained by Dhingra's act and other similar acts in India make a serious mistake. Dhingra was a patriot, but his love was blind. He gave his body in a wrong way; its result can only be mischievous.' In 1934, he said about futility of inflicting violence over the opponent in these words, 'It is because the rulers, if they are bad, are so, not necessarily or wholly by reason of birth, but largely because of their environment, that I have hopes of their altering their course. It is perfectly true, as the writer says, that the rulers cannot alter their course themselves. If they are dominated by their environment, they do not surely deserve to be killed, but should be changed by a change of environment. But the environment are we—the people who make the rulers what they are. They are thus an exaggerated edition of what we are in the aggregate. If my argument is sound, any violence done to the rulers would be violence done to ourselves. It would be suicide. And since I do not want to commit suicide, nor encourage my neighbors to do so, I become non-violent myself and invite my neighbors to do likewise… violence may destroy one or more bad rulers, but like Ravana's heads, others will pop up in their places, for the root lies elsewhere.' After the Bombay riots in 1921, he wrote, 'I cannot hate and Englishman or anyone else. I have spoken and written much against his institutions, especially the one he has set up in India. I shall continue to do so if I live. But you must not mistake my condemnation of the system with that of the man.'

So, it was not all about the humanitarian angle of killings or non-killings that Gandhi propagated non-violence as a prerequisite for public activities.

For all these and similar purposes, Gandhi's life-long search of revolutionary democratic tools was given the name of "Non-violence".

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

REFERENCES

"Letter to Maganlal Gandhi", July 25, 1918, CWMG 14 p-504-05

www.historymarg.com

"Civility", Navajivan, December 18, 1921, CWMG 22 p-43-46

"Force or Restraint?", Navajivan, July 13, 1924, CWMG 24 p-380

"Letter to Lalan Pandit", November 15, 1926, CWMG 32 p-46-47

"Letter to Bhogilal", September 22, 1928, CWMG 37 p-298

"'The Fiery Ordeal', I, When Killing May Be Ahimsa", Young India, October 4, 1928, CWMG 37 p-311-12

"A Revolutionary's Defense", Young India, February 12, 1925, CWMG 26 p-140

"Was It A Failure?", Young India, November 10, 1927, CWMG 35 p-224-25
"Speech at Subjects Committee, A.I.C.C.", December 29, 1929, CWMG 42 p-332-33

Tendulkar-II, "At Juhu", 1924, p-130-31
"My Friend, The Revolutionary", Young India, April 9, 1925, CWMG 26 p-486-87

"The Cult of The Bomb", Young India, January 2, 1930, CWMG 42, p-362

"Speech at Gandhi Seva Sangh Meeting, Brindaban", May 3, 1939, CWMG 69 p-199

"Interview To "The Bombay Chronicle"", March 24, 1927, CWMG 33 p-188-89

"So, Called in Consistencies", Harijan, February 20, 1937, CWMG 64 p-385

"Discussion with Philipose", Harijan, May 27, 1939, CWMG 69 p-60

"Discussion with Maurice Frydman", Harijan, January, 28, 1939, CWMG 68 p-266

Tendulkar-II, "Hasten Slowly", 1921, p-42

Tendulkar-I, "To London Again", 1909, p-103
"Why Against Violence", Harijan, September 21,1934, CWMG 59 p-41-42

Tendulkar-II, "Half Naked Fakir" 1921, p-69